Stickiness

A method for dramatically increasing the recognition, recall, and unsolicited sharing of an idea or expression.

Popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in his book The Tipping Point, the term stickiness refers to the ability of certain ideas to become lodged in the cultural consciousness. Stickiness applies to anything that can be seen, heard, or touched—slogans, advertisements, and products. Six variables appear to be key in the creation of sticky ideas:

1. Simplicity—The idea can be expressed simply and succinctly, without sacrificing depth (e.g., "It's the economy, stupid," used during Bill Clinton's 1992 U.S. presidential campaign).

2. Surprise—The idea contains an element of surprise, which grabs attention (e.g., when the Center for Science in the Public Interest wanted to alarm consumers to the amount of fat in movie popcorn, they noted that it had more fat than "a bacon-and-egg breakfast, a Big Mac and fries for lunch, and a steak dinner with all the trimmings—combined!").

3. Concreteness—The idea is specific and concrete, using plain language or imagery (e.g., John F. Kennedy's 1962 moon speech: "We choose to go to the moon in this decade...").

4. Credibility—The idea is believable, often communicated by a trusted source or as an appeal to common sense (e.g., Subway restaurants' Jared campaign engaged the personal testimonies of Jared Fogle, complete with before and after photographs, to show the benefits of his Subway sandwich diet).

5. Emotion—The idea elicits an emotional reaction (e.g., on Halloween in the 1960s and 1970s, false rumors circulated that sadness was putting razor blades in apples, scaring parents and effectively shutting down the tradition of trick-or-treating for much of the United States).

6. Story—The idea is expressed in the context of a story, dramatically increasing its memorability and retelling (e.g., the Cabbage Patch Kids craze was due to the story attached to them—each doll is uniquely named, and delivered with a birth certificate from BabyLand Hospital).

Consider stickiness in the design of instruction, advertising, products, and other contexts involving memory. Keep messaging succinct, but profound. Employ surprise to capture attention and motivate sharing. Ensure that ideas are expressed using specific time frames and objects or events that are available to the senses. Favor presenting evidence and letting people draw their own conclusions. Incorporate effective triggers to evoke a strong emotional response. Couch ideas in rich contexts to improve memorability and transmissibility.

See also Archetypes, Propositional Density, Storytelling, and von Restorff Effect.

This iconic poster by artist Shepard Fairey became synonymous with the 2008 Obama presidential campaign. The poster's simple message, unique aesthetics, and emotional grassroots appeal made it incredibly sticky, creating a viral sharing phenomenon as soon as Fairey posted the image on the Web.